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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the meanings people give to certain words that describe different groups of people. Participants indicated the chronological age they have in mind when using 15 age terms, including baby, senior citizen, adolescent, infant, mature, elderly, youth, and old. The 150 replies to the questionnaire came from college students, members of community social clubs, secretaries, faculty, and residents of a retirement home. The results indicated that the stereotypes of the old, elderly, and aging are firmly entrenched in the communication and attitudes of many Americans. At least 14% of the respondents used the terms senior citizen and aged to include persons as young as 60 years of age. Most respondents used the terms senior citizen, elderly, old, and aged to describe people 70 years of age, while 79% considered middle-aged to be descriptive of the 40 to 50 age group. More of the respondents considered age 70 as "old" rather than choosing ages 75 and 80. There were no correlations between respondents' demographic factors (age, income, and education) and their answers to the age questions. (Following the report of the questionnaire results, an argument is made for developing better communication with persons in the second half of life by considering many more individual characteristics than mere chronological age. A copy of the questionnaire is provided.) (RL)

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The Older American Audience: How "Old" is "Older"?

Submitted to the Intracultural Panel
of the Intercultural Commmication
Interest Group

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The Older American Audience: How "Old" is "Older"?

In recent years a group of Americans labeled as "the old" or "the aging" have attracted the attention of socio-gerontologists, political and economic planners, publishers, and some speech communication professionals.

One reason for such attraction is the recent growth in the size of this group of "old" or "aging" Americans. The U.S. Census Bureau figures tell us that the population 65 and over has increased nearly eight times since 1900 while the total population has only tripled. Between 1970 and 1978 alone, this population rose by 20 percent--from 20 to 24 million. In 1976 persons 65 and over could expect, on average, 16 more years of life.[1] The number of persons over 65 will be almost doubled by the year 2020--to some 45 million. On the average, one out of three "older" persons is now over 75 and this proportion will rise substantially by 2020.[2]

As well as numerical power, the "older" population has economic and political power. Although the total "old" population increased by 4 million since 1970, the number of the "old" who are below the poverty level dropped during this period by about 1.5 million--from one-fourth of this age group in 1970 to one-seventh in 1977. Also, a substantial number of the "older" population is not only drawing social security, pensions, etc. but is still working: 21 percent of the men and 8 percent of the women in this group are still in the labor force, a total of 29 percent of American workers.[3] The "old" also provide votes at election

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[1] "How About That?" NRTA Journal, July-August, 1981, p. 12

[2] Barnice L. Neugarten, "Growing Old in 202: How Will it be Different?" National Forum, LXI, 3, Summer, 1981, p. 28

[3] "How About That?" p. 12

time; 62 percent of them voted in the last Presidential election compared to 49 percent of the 18-34 year olds, and their turnout for the Congressional races was 10 percent higher than that of the total voting age population.[4]

Given these statistics, we can understand the growing prominence of this "old/older" group. However, as speech communication professionals, we also notice the stereotyping, the "lumping" approach to the "old/older" population used by the Census Bureau and the many interpreters of census statistics. Anyone 65 or over is automatically labeled "old," "elderly," and "aging." This approach is also used by the authors and publishers who give us books telling us how to survive once we have hit that 65 cutoff number. There is Breaking the Age Barrier by Elaine Partnow, The Longevity Factor by McQuade and Aikman, Live Longer by Feinman and Wilson, No More Dying by Kurtzman and Gordon, Over 50 by Auren Uris (we have just become "old" fifteen years sooner), and Winning the Age Game by Gloria Heidi. Of course, there are all the books on how to avoid heart attacks, high blood pressure, arthritis, etc., etc., etc.—those conditions we acquire as we become "older Americans." There are also Don't Retire from Life, Let's Rejoin the Human Race, and Growing Old Gracefully, all of which view their readers as people just turned 65.

I am especially intrigued by the jacket description of The Starr-Weiner Report on Sex and Sexuality in the Mature Years. It reads:

> A bold new survey that sets the record straight on sex after 60 and demonstrates that all of us can look forward to continuing and fulfilling sex lives.

Thomas Collins' The Complete Guide to Retirement (at age 65 naturally) has been printed and reprinted by Prentice-Hall since 1970 in England, Australia, Canada, India, and Japan. The Senior Citizens Center in Reseda, California,

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[4] Ibid.

has a current radio commercial telling us, "If you are over 60, if you are lonely and bored, join us here at our Senior Citizens Center." The implication is that at 61 you have abruptly become lonely and bored and are in need of some Senior Citizens games and companionship. Of course, we all know that Social Security categorizes us as "old" at 65. If you read materials from government agencies, realtors pushing Sun Cities retirement, and banks wanting your pension money business, you are aware of the fact that they, too, are playing the stereotype game with "the old" by assuming that at 65 you are "old."

There is one bright light in this gloom and doom of "old," "aging," and "elderly" labeling. Some people in the general public are becoming irritated by this automatic assumption. I cite the following short letter to the Editor as an example.

> I am writing to protest media articles that label persons as "elderly." My specific reference is to a United Press International article which appeared in The Times (June 6), "Almost-Broke Sisters Win $50,000 on Slot Machine." The article started out "Two elderly sisters," etc. The second and last paragraph read, "Julia Spatafore, 66, and Sara Cosco, 60" etc.
>
> I am not objecting to your giving the ages of persons, but one is not automatically "over the hill" at any particular age.[5]

Unfortunately, this bright light dims when we examine the results of a questionnaire I distributed in May, 1981, and from which I received 150 replies.[6] The sample included college students, members of two social clubs in the community, secretaries, faculty, and residents of a retirement home. My purpose, as stated on the questionnaires, was to "gather information about the meanings that Americans give to certain words used in our society

[5] Los Angeles Times, 7 July 1980, Pt. II, p. 4

[6] See Appendix A

to describe different groups of people." I then asked them to write in the chronological age they have in mind when they use words such as baby, senior citizen, adolescent, infant, mature, elderly, youth, and old. I did not limit the list to only those words used to describe people of the "aging" population because I wanted to avoid triggering any "mind-set" the respondees might have about words such as senior citizen, old or elderly if they appeared by themselves in a list. What I discovered from the responses was that I need not have bothered to do so; the "mind-sets" appeared.

The questionnaire results show that if you are 65, you are viewed and named as a Senior Citizen by 67 percent. Fourteen percent call you Senior Citizen at age 60 while 19 percent give you grace until age 70. If you are age 70, you are placed in the categories of not only Senior Citizen, but also elderly, old, and aged. A surprising 15 percent label you as aged if you are 60 or 65. You are allowed by 79 percent to be middle-aged only if you are in the 40-50 age group, and 39 percent of that 79 percent, nearly half, see you as middle-aged at age 40. Less than ½ of one percent let you be middle-aged if you have reached age 55. Yet, 56% of the respondees who are in their fifties describe themselves as middle-aged. Obviously, the choice of age labels can vary according to who is doing the choosing. You are considered old at age 70 by 28 percent, at age 75 by 16 percent, and at age 80 by 18 percent. (I have no explanation as to why more of the respondees consider 70 as old rather than choosing ages 75 and 80.) The range of responses for the word elderly is fairly wide: 21 percent chose age 65, 20 percent chose age 70, 17 percent selected age 75, and another 17 percent chose age 80.

The results for the word aged surprised and confused me. Sixty-seven percent of the respondees selected age 70 as aged, 16 percent chose age 75, and 25 percent chose age 80. Notice that these age ranges of 70, 75, and

80 are the same as those receiving the highest percentages in the category of old. We also remember that 15 percent chose age 60 as aged. Only 9 percent selected the years 90 to 100 as the period when we become aged. Perhaps the semantic distinction between aged and old is disappearing from American speech.

On the questionnaire I asked for information about the respondee's age, birthplace, religion, income, sex, and educational level, thinking that there might be some correlation between one or more of these and the specific answers to the age questions. There was none.

In addition to the age terminology, I included the phrase, "the best years of my life." One-fourth of the respondees chose the twenties, 22 percent chose the teen years, and 16 percent selected the thirties. Only 10 percent think the forties are the best and only 5 percent chose the fifties. Some apparently very happy souls, 17 percent of the total, said that "now" were their best years and 3 percent said that "all" the years were the best ones. One person responded that the best years were "two great weeks." The 63 percent choosing the teens, twenties, and thirties as "best years" may be under the influence of the American ideal of "youth" and "young" which is constantly reflected in our advertising, fashions, and psuedo-medical products.

There were some unexpected answers given by some persons to the question, "What word or words do you use to describe the age group you belong to?" One 34 year-old wrote "pre-middlescent" and a 40 year-old replied, "dissipated, overmedicated, goal-oriented." The majority of those in their twenties replied with "young" or "young adult," but several offered the following descriptions: surviving; confused and overworked; lost and living on the cusp; chaotic, uncertain, damned cynical; flower child gone to seed. One person 55 answered, "squeezed generation--have to cater to both the young and the old." A 45 year-old sees her age group as "young experienced adults" while a 70 year-old

said, "happy-go-lucky." I suspect these kinds of answers tell me more about the emotional state of the individuals replying than about how they label their own age group.

The results of my questionnaire were discouraging to me as a speech communication professional who believes first, last, and always that careful audience analysis can make the difference between effective and ineffective communication. The results indicate that the stereotypes of "old," "elderly," "aging," and so on are alive and well in the communication of many of us. As we have seen, they are also alive and well in the official and the informal communications of government, business, and other institutions in our society.

I find this condition unfortunate because we know--when we stop to think rather than just to react--that

> ...people grow old in very different ways. The range of differences becomes greater, not narrower, as people move through the years of adulthood. Because of this great heterogeneity, age is a poor predictor of physical or intellectual or social competence in the second half of life.[7]

In developing effective communication with persons in the second half of life, we need to realize that just knowing the age of our audience is not enough. We need to consider the other elements that they as an audience hold in common. As Bernice Neugarten, a behavioral scientist and an authority in the field of adult development and aging, reminds us, we need at a minimum, to distinguish between the young-old and the old-old. (Even she hopes to find better terms than these.) We can make such distinctions on the basis of common social and health characteristics rather than on a common age. Old-olds are those who have major physical and/or mental difficulties and therefore need special health and social services. Young-olds are healthy, vigorous,

[7]Neugarten, p. 30

and competent persons who live in their own homes, are active in churches, clubs, and community organizations, are relatively well-educated, and are politically active.[8] Of two people both age 75, one can be young-old and the other old-old. Of course, even within these two large age groupings, there is great variety in the characteristics of our audience of "older" Americans, and there will be great resentment focused on our communication if we fail to recognize the variety. I suspect that Lowell Thomas who died last August at the age of 90 saw himself as one of the young-olds to the end, as do many of the people you and I know as friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

Some socio-gerontologists predict that because of the numerical growth of the young-old population with its strong characteristics, American society may be developing into an "age-irrelevant society," one in which arbitrary constraints based on age and on involuntary age segregation will not exist. People will be able to take advantage of all the opportunities for which their mental, physical, and intellectual abilities--not their chronological age--fit them. We have already seen the move toward removal of age restrictions on our work life; we can now work past 65 without our employer automatically giving us our gold watch dinner at age 65. According to federal law (the Age Discrimination in Employment Act), it is just as illegal now for a prospective employer to ask our age as it is to ask our sex, except in rare job circumstances.

Legally, we cannot be discriminated against because of our age, but socially the discrimination and the stereotyping continues. It appears even in places where you might think the professional training and attitudes of the persons involved would make them strongly aware of the illogic and injustice of such arbitrary labeling. For example, in a six-sentence review of a sociological text titled Aging and Society, a collection of articles on current research and

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[8]Ibid.

policy perspectives in the area of the age group of 65 and over, we find the term aged used seven times and elderly used twice—the only two nouns used to describe persons 65 and over.[9] We note that both the review writer and the editors of this book assume that 65 is still the magic number that separates effective vigorous citizens who do things from those who must be "done for."

Certainly, those persons enjoying the second half of life have specific problems and concerns which knowledgeable persons will recognize and honor. These are the characteristics an "older" audience has in common. However, the demographic factor of chronological age is not one to which we as communicators should give precedence in our audience analysis. We need to remember that the saying, "You're only as old as you feel," became a traditional comment because there is indeed truth in it.

How "old" is "older?" When do we become elderly or aged? The only logical and realistic answer is, "It depends." We see that we may be making a mistake in using such omnibus labels to refer to a large and growing population in our society whose members may not call themselves such names. Many of them have abilities far removed from the stereotype of the helpless, ailing, fragile souls who need to be "managed" for their own good.

> You are old, Father William, the young man said,
> And your hair has become very white;
> And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
> Do you think, at your age, it is right?[10]

(Emphasis added.)

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[9] "Family Issues and Women Studies" Catalog. Sage Publications. August, 1981, p. 15.

[10] Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Dodd, Mead and Co., Inc., 1922, p. 6

Dear Participant,

To help me gather information about the meanings that Americans give to certain words used in our society to describe different groups of people, I would greatly appreciate your completion of the following questionnaire. Please do NOT give your name. All replies are confidential.

A. After each word in the following list, please place the chronological age range you have in mind when you use the word.

1. baby_____ 8. child_____
2. senior citizen_____ 9. aged_____
3. adolescent_____ 10. youth_____
4. infant_____ 11. old_____
5. mature_____ 12. retired_____
6. elderly_____ 13. middle-aged_____
7. young_____ 14. young adult_____

15. "the best years of my life"_____

B. What is the approximate age of the person you most admire?_____

C. What word or words do you use to describe the age group you belong to?_____

The following information is for demographic purposes only. Please check the appropriate items.

1. Education: high school_____ some college_____ college degree_____
   some postgraduate work_____ postgraduate degree_____
2. Sex: F_____ M_____
3. Birthplace: New England_____ Mid-Atlantic States_____ The South_____
   Midwest_____ Northwest_____ Southwest_____
4. Age:_____
5. Income level: Below $10,000_____ $10-20,000_____ $20-30,000_____
   $30-40,000_____ $40-50,000_____ Above $50,000_____
6. Religious affiliation:_____

Thank you for your cooperation. Please return the questionnaire to:

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